

Forced: Perceptions of “Woke” Politics in Video Games

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Through a close analysis of online video game commentary, this article argues that the flashpoint conflict identified as GamerGate levered open a space in mainstream online spaces for highly partisan interpretation of video games. In online spaces such as Reddit and YouTube, semianonymous players and semiprofessional commentators perform lengthy analyses of game content and interpretations of developers’ purported political agendas to identify the embedded meanings that they allege are implanted into video games. These game critics feel that these typically left-leaning, “woke” political perspectives are forced into games as part of an organized campaign driven, in part, by the desire to estrange the “traditional” gamer demographic and to attract investment from capital investment firms.

Keywords: GamerGate, video games, politics, woke, game criticism

The flashpoint of GamerGate is now a decade behind us, but the effects of that cultural moment continue to reverberate. These echoes have by now reached well beyond the original context of a gamer protest about perceived unfairly favorable coverage of certain video games, and now extend into mainstream culture as far as presidential politics. In an earlier article (Ruch, 2021), we addressed the interaction between politics and video games from the perspective of game developers. To complement this research, the question of gamers’ perceptions of how politics play within video games became pertinent. This is particularly relevant in the past few years since GamerGate, given the strident views often expressed by outspoken gamers either through social media or via video essays and live streams.

This article will leverage Stuart Hall’s “conjuncture” perspective to argue that the years since the GamerGate hashtag campaign represent a cultural crisis, a period of metamorphosis that has laid bare the contest between ideological powers fighting over, and on the grounds of, video games. We will show that critical perspectives on games have evolved from the notional “ethics in video game journalism” complaint to much larger-scale networks of influence that include social justice politics, corporate funding models, and partisan, governmental conspiracies. This article seeks to lay a piece of the foundation for a continued exploration of the relevance of online political activism, and how ideologies can manifest within subcultures before spreading much more widely into society at large. From game studies to communication studies more broadly, most communicative interactions occurring within the field of video game discourse present a rich corpus for analysis of perspectives, beliefs, and trends.

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In Hall's words, "A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape" (as cited in Hines, 2021, para. 2). Building on Hall, Soroya Murray (2021) says, "GamerGate can be thought of as a paradigmatic irruption of something that would normally remain pervasive but invisible into public view" (p. 39). Murray's (2021) compelling argument for a cultural studies perspective on video games sets the stage for continued exploration of the various contests and contradictions that have continued to develop since her analysis in 2021. Here, we will take seriously the reactions of gamer critics who broadcast their interpretations of the content and production of video games as indicative of the state of society more generally.

The Conjuncture

The concept of "conjuncture" (Hall, 2011; Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2013) is a useful model for describing these moments when several forces collide to make a crisis visible. Hines (2021) describes the "social, political, economic and ideological contradictions" that make up a conjuncture, and several elements revealed by this study fit this definition (para. 2). In this discussion, we begin from a perspective within video game criticism yet can turn the ideological lens beyond this particular context into electoral politics, education, and corporate America. John Clarke (2014) notes the complex and widespread nature of these conjunctural disruptions and encourages the "analytic attention on the multiplicity of forces, accumulated antagonisms, and possible lines of emergence from the conjuncture" (p. 115). We will analyze the reactions to the politics that gamers view as "in" video games as part of the overall struggle of powerful political forces to emerge from this period of instability using Hall et al. (2013) as a framework. We can understand the variously coherent arguments circulated by these critics as an articulation of the (perhaps waning) dominance of stereotypical, straight White male views of video games. As Raymond Williams reminds us, such hegemony "has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, [and] challenged" (as cited in Clarke, 2014, p. 120). Our anti-woke critics are, then, struggling to defend a settlement that may finally be destabilizing.

The situation in the 1980s and 1990s was something of a manufactured "settlement" of the video game industry, which favored straight, White, young, and male perspectives (Kline, Dyer-Witthof, & De Peuter, 2003; Shaw, 2013). In the early part of the 2000s, as independent developers gained more traction and AAA games began to recognize audiences outside this heretofore unchallenged group (cf. Anthropy, 2012), a conflict erupted as GamerGate. Although to many, GamerGate appeared little more than an angry harassment campaign, the work performed by its most active members carved out a durable space in which such perspectives and actions (i.e., harassment campaigns, doxxing, attempts to organize boycotts) were legitimate responses to the perceived diminishment of certain gamers' privileged positions within a social domain. Other researchers have documented GamerGate itself, in some cases firsthand, so extensive description will not be necessary here (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2016; Phillips, 2020).

This conjuncture extending after GamerGate is caught squarely between opposing, contradictory forces. Ideologically, a fundamentally White patriarchy persists, masquerading as meritocracy (Paul, 2018). Economically, however, in both production and consumption, video games have begun to pull away from this niche. Some vocal game critics have resisted this pull, claiming that the economic interests lie in the

other direction (i.e., game developers should continue to “cater to” the purportedly preferred audience). These critics also accuse developers of compromising their own creative visions to secure corporate investments by collaborating with inclusivity consultancy firms such as Sweet Baby Inc. For critics, pursuing the first form of financial reward is acceptable, whereas the other is not.

We see a similar “culture war” between progressive and socially inclusive perspectives and right-leaning, conservative, hegemonic forces across the United States. Taking the election of Barack Obama as a milestone, we observe the fierce conservative reaction against his personal and political progressiveness, first among the Tea Party Republicans, the “alt-right,” and then in Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. As minoritized politicians continue to run and often succeed in elections (cf. Kamala Harris, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Raphael Warnock), we see similar defensiveness from White, right-leaning Americans who wish to return to the purportedly halcyon days of America’s past. Hence, making America great “again.” The events of January 6, 2021, serve as another marker by which the turmoil can be measured, when elements of the right-wing population refused to accept the peaceful transition of presidential power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden. Other recent civil conflicts should also not be forgotten: the Occupy Wall Street movement; the Women’s March in 2017; Black Lives Matter protests of the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and others; the attacks on diversity in education and government exemplified by Governor Ron DeSantis’s actions in Florida; and the waxing and waning of so-called DEI efforts in both higher education and corporate America. All of these represent the increasingly visible, even physical, clash between antagonistic forces that characterize the current cultural moment.

The critical discourse surrounding video games will be viewed through the nonprofessional, hobbyist lens of gamer critics. As we shall see below, there is certainly an economic component to this conjuncture, but as Hall (2011, citing Gramsci) is quick to remind us, “conjunctural crises are never solely economic” (p. 9). Here, the issues of gender, race, and associated political or cultural power are primary. Economic interests may be little more than a representation of that general sense of ascendancy or denigration. The anti-woke gamer-critic laments the perceived marginalization of the stereotypical straight, White, American male video game consumer through the “forced” inclusion of non-White, nonmale, nonheterosexual characters or otherwise progressive elements of modern culture. Their narrative describes the loss of a last, protected, safe space, free of such “political” issues. Instead of an escapist fantasy, video games have become yet another channel through which these nostalgic players are forced to endure the woke ideological politics that have been, from their perspective, inserted artificially into their games.

Through platforms such as Reddit and YouTube, these anti-woke gamers disseminate their views at an impressive scale. Although any individual streamer may not amass the audience that a professional outlet such as Kotaku or IGN might, these independent voices may also be filling a new gap in the discourse. As publications continue to be shuttered by their owners, these semiprofessional critics have an opportunity to fill an important niche (Chan, 2023; Jackson & MacLeod, 2024; Moreau, 2024; Plunkett, 2024; Sinclair, 2022).

The collision of disparate forces described within a conjuncture (Hall et al., 2013) manifest through individual actions of ideologically-motivated individuals moving from one context to another. In one high-

profile example, the link between GamerGate and political violence became explicit: In 2022, David DePape attacked Paul Pelosi, the husband of then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, with a hammer. DePape claims that he was first drawn to right-wing conspiracies through GamerGate (Rodriguez, 2023). Kristin Bezio (2018) argues persuasively that an explicit connection exists between the rise of the so-called "alt-right" and Gamergate, pointing out the role that Steve Bannon's website Breitbart played in disparaging Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and other victims of the harassment campaign. Bannon would later become a senior advisor to President Trump and has more recently been found in contempt of Congress (Sneed & Cole, 2024). In October 2024, DePape has been sentenced to life in prison (Deliso, 2024).

For video game analyses following Hall's (2011) critical cultural studies footsteps, Soraya Murray's (2021) recent work provides a useful point of entry. She dives deep into several games to demonstrate that "video games represent a powerful invocation of the lived world in playable form, which offer insights into the core fears, fantasies, hopes and anxieties of a given culture in a specific cultural context" (Murray, 2021, p. 2). The reactions of the critics reviewed here serve to highlight in precise terms many of those fears and hopes that Murray envisions. This is especially true when the critics turn to real-world events to explain how their video games became, in their words, so political. This study will analyze the content produced by a group of gamer critics whose interpretation of these games reveals key perspectives on games, culture, economics, and politics. These views about the function of art, representations of ethnic minorities, women, gender identities, and theories of media production, reception, and audience are a stark reminder of the constant struggle between ideological forces. In Hall's (2011) words, "hegemony has constantly to be 'worked on,' maintained, renewed, revised," and is never a "completed product" (p. 26).

Finally, this article draws a stark contrast between the perceptions of politics in games from the perspective of game players and the statements made by some modern game developers. In Ruch (2021), game developers and representatives of mainstream companies such as Activision and Ubisoft declare that their games do not contain or advance any political agenda or perspective. The developers employed several means to avoid designating anything in their games as "political." These include a theory of interactive media that precludes any particular authorial intent in favor of player interpretation and an appeal to a utopian future in which all possible viewpoints would be implemented in games-as-simulations (Ruch, 2021).

As will be shown below, these anti-woke gamer critics roundly reject these explanations. Further, they claim that it is possible to name specific individuals or organizations who deliberately insert political content into otherwise nonpolitical video games. Interestingly, this does imply that video games have the potential to remain apolitical. Instead of projecting into the future, though, these critics look backward to the past to an imagined time before such politics were introduced into their favorite medium.

Method

The texts analyzed for this study are drawn from two widely used platforms: Reddit and YouTube. Reddit is a text- and image-based messaging platform comprised of many thousands of "subreddits" that operate as clusters or communities focused on a given topic. YouTube provides a platform for content creators to host video recordings. The YouTube channel is a popular format for individuals or groups to

create and distribute videos. Channels offer some of the features of social networking that allow users to follow and subscribe to a creator's page, which will then notify the user of new videos.

This multimedia corpus suggests a multimodal discourse analysis approach. As noted by Ensslin (2012), MDA is closely related to critical discourse analysis but "dispenses with the logocentric views of discourse and, instead, integrates all semiotic modes that are at work in the texts. Typically, this includes . . . still and moving images, pictography, photography, typography and aspects of color" and more (p. 23). Ensslin is careful to include the discourse around video games and not only the language used within video games in her approach to the language of gaming. Ensslin outlines five key areas for discourse analysis. The two of most concern here are: "Language about games and gaming used by gamers across different media and communication platforms," and "Language about games and gaming used by journalists, politicians, parents, activists, and other media stakeholders" (Ensslin, 2012, p. 6).

Wodak and Meyer's (2001) approach to critical discourse analysis suggests that "the problem" should be addressed in the context of a "network of practices" that contain a semiotic element. The context here consists of manifold semiotic elements, including the video games themselves, interviews, press statements or other sources of news, and the videos and Reddit posts made in response to those games and news sources. Furthermore, the network includes a separation between professional game journalists, quasiprofessional but unaffiliated game critics, and everyday game players who post pseudonymously on Reddit. The problem in which they are enmeshed is the intense disagreement between game players (especially vocal critics on Reddit and YouTube) and game developers about the position of "politics" within games and the gaming discourse more broadly.

In terms of corpus, this study proceeds through an organic selection of authors and texts. The examples here were chosen because of the richness of their content and the points of reference they make to each other through explicit links or reactions and through shared language and concerns. The first texts included are Reddit posts, guided by the research of others investigating gamer culture and GamerGate, specifically Jhaver, Chan, and Bruckman (2018) and Massanari (2017). As a result of this inspiration, the subreddits *r/KotakuinAction* (2014) and *r/videogames* (2008) were chosen as contrasting examples. The textual nature of Reddit allowed for efficient keyword searches of the forum for posts about politics in video games. This very soon led to a focus on the idea of "woke" politics, as this term clearly dominated the discourse at the time of this study. Following this, a similar survey of YouTube was conducted, this time supplemented by the "woke" keyword. Several key critics rose to the surface, and through various cross-linking and "reaction" videos, a small network of personalities was selected for closer review.

Who Are Gamers and What Are They Talking About?

The difference between "gamers" and "people who play games" is becoming an important theoretical touchstone in game studies. With each successive year, studies from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2023) to scholarly research such as Engelstätter and Ward (2022) show that an increasing percentage of people play games. That said, not all people who play games identify as "gamers." Who identifies as a gamer and whom gamer culture identifies as a "true" gamer are both contested and are likely to continue to evolve. Neither, however, is congruent with "anyone who plays a video game" of any particular

type or any particular frequency. Some took the evidence of the GamerGate controversy itself to declare video game play had essentially become mainstream and that, as such, the “gamer” demographic was no longer relevant (Alexander, 2014; Golding, 2014).

That said, this study focuses on vocal, self-described gamers who operate at the sharp end of that cultural spectrum. These are gamers who stake significant portions of their identities on game playing, on being informed, having opinions about games, and being visible in their discussions (Shaw, 2012). These gamers are clearly affected by the neoliberal ideology of identity that Hall et al. (2013) identifies: “Everyone . . . is expected to think of themselves as consumers of “products” that will bring them individual . . . advantage” (p. 19). The authors describe tendencies toward “consumer and celebrity culture . . . the fetishization of technology . . . the triumph of ‘life-style’ over substance . . . and the commercialization of ‘identity’” (Hall et al., 2013, p. 19). This perspective describes the current “influencer” content creator quite thoroughly.

These prolific video bloggers on YouTube style themselves as quite distinct from the professionals who either work directly for name-brand sites such as GameSpot, IGN, or Kotaku, or who have regularly engaged freelancers for similar publications. Generally, these video bloggers would likely prefer to be viewed as gamers first and critics second to ensure their status as outsiders to the purportedly compromised system that they tend to criticize. This independence and outsider status are crucial to the argument they make about “leftist group-think” and similar tropes. Thus, they must walk a fine line between remaining one of the gamers and an independent voice who is not compromised by corporate interests, yet is also present as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and just professional enough to be trusted. And all the while, they benefit from a monetized YouTube channel.

Finding the Politics in Games on Reddit

In the wake of GamerGate, sites such as r/KotakuInAction (2014) have carved out spaces for the ongoing discussion of politics, particularly right-wing perspectives in video game culture. Ten years after the initial hashtag campaign, this subreddit proclaims itself to be “the main hub for GamerGate on Reddit” (r/KotakuInAction, 2014). In the intervening decade, the forum has expanded its discussion to include perspectives on the presence of politics and ideology in games and their development, not just the purported focus on ethics in journalism.

On Reddit, the term “politics” has a far broader definition than that suggested by the developers noted above (Ruch, 2021, p. 138). As such, “politics” are not only visible but pervasive, according to the most vocal gamers in the communities reviewed here. Those politics are not the literal electoral and governmental politics that journalists or developers might have considered. Neither do they appear to be the ideological politics of violence, militarization, or cultural hegemony that Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009) identified. Rather, political perspectives described as “woke” cause the most consternation. According to gamers in r/KotakuInAction (2014), not only are these perspectives palpable in games but they are also often “forced” or “shoehorned” into the game, rather than occurring “naturally.”

The term “woke” requires some specific attention. The term does not originate in games criticism or even media studies more generally. Rather, “woke” is drawn from Black American vernacular, as in to “stay woke and alert to the deceptions of other people was a basic survival tactic” (Romano, 2020, para. 1). Another origin is suggested by Conor Murray (2023) at *Forbes*:

“Stay woke” was spoken in the outro of a 1938 song, “Scottsboro Boys” by Lead Belly, based on the 1931 Alabama case in which nine Black teenagers were accused of raping two White women. Lead Belly urges listeners to “stay woke, keep their eyes open” at the conclusion of the song. (Murray, 2023, para. 3)

In this sense, then, being woke requires an awareness not just of deceptions by others but those specifically couched in social bigotry and discrimination. Woke is inextricably tied to the Black American experience of racism and can be further applied to sexism, gender discrimination, homophobia, and other forms of bias and bigotry. Therefore, woke joins a lineage of terms such as “politically correct” or “social justice (warrior),” having been co-opted by the conservative perspective and turned pejorative. For example, the Randian, objectivist publication *The Objective Standard* suggests the following definition:

Being “woke” means being hypersensitive to any alleged injustices concerning group identities. According to the woke view, a person’s identity is determined not by his choices, actions, and convictions, but by his race, gender, and sexual orientation. Being woke does not mean merely opposing racism, sexism, and the like; it means embracing a particular ideology. If you oppose racism and sexism, yet don’t embrace this ideology, you’re not woke; you’re part of the problem. (Dahlen, 2021, para. 6)

The hostile interpretation of the word is clearly visible in Dahlen’s (2021) definition above. Vox summarizes the contemporary function of the word:

“Woke” has evolved into a single-word summation of leftist political ideology, centered on social justice politics and critical race theory. This framing of “woke” is bipartisan: It’s used as a shorthand for political progressiveness by the left, and as a denigration of leftist culture by the right. (Romano, 2020, para. 2)

The word “woke” therefore, does generally represent a cluster of left-leaning, progressive perspectives and values, whether it is invoked by a liberal or conservative speaker. The difference lies in the positive or negative connotation of the value of those views. A casual browsing of KotakuInAction is enough to determine that woke politics are perceived as a common and pernicious problem that often “ruins” games. YouTube content creator Asmongold references possible criteria for a woke game: “Are there Black people? OK it’s woke . . . Is there a woman on screen? Is she wearing clothes? Then it’s woke . . . Is it critical of Western ideals at all? Yes? OK then it’s woke” (Asmongold TV, 2023, 00:00:45).

One of the most consistently criticized “woke” games is *The Last of Us: Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020). For many, comparisons between the first and second games in the series indicate a moment when the industry “went woke.” *The Last of Us: Part I* (Naughty Dog, 2013) focused on the story of the lead

character, Joel, whose role is to defend his daughter-figure, Ellie, in a postapocalyptic world of zombies and other mortal dangers. The game presents a prototypical premise of a damsel in distress being protected by a stereotypically masculine father-figure. The perspective of *The Last of Us: Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) is dramatically shifted when Joel is killed early in the game by one of the antagonists, who is female. Players then experience most of the game from Ellie's perspective. Further, the perspective switches to the antagonist, Abby, several times. For the anti-woke critic, the shift from a masculine-dominant position to a female-centered perspective meets the criteria for "going woke." This is especially true because of Abby's muscular physique and her murder of Joel. She contradicts the typical feminine traits found in female video game characters and is thus strongly woke. One r/KotakuInAction user says:

The Last of Us 2. Oh my god I loved the first part of the game but then they made me play with you know who for half the game. Also half the characters were gay and all men were evil. Sure let there be representation but there should be limits. I have no problem with Ellie being Gay but then her girlfriend is pregnant and she is escaping her boyfriend. Then we have a suspect character Abby who looks like man and on top of it we have another gay main character I won't name. (SnooMemesjellies5491, 2023)

Another Reddit user asked the community to explain why *The Last of Us: Part II* was significant to discussions of woke politics. In this lengthy reply, KeyStatus8880 (2021) draws the connection from video games to capital investment to electoral politics—conveniently mapping the wider conjuncture:

A game designer [presumably Jacob Minkoff] realized he couldn't actually follow up on his previous success, so he sought to take refuge in politics so that some people would pretend the sequel wasn't a mediocre (at best) game.

In reality, it was the bad sequel that will do him in.

Edit: If you want to know why most people do this, it's simple hatred. They hate the kind of people most likely to play games (that is, men, who are far more likely to be conservative than women are) and want to ruin the things they love. For others, they think that if they just "educate" those men—that is to say, if they can just find that magical combination of words—that those men will no longer be capable of disagreeing with them.

It's a mixed bag. But most of them just want to ruin something the people they hate love.

Edit: If you want to know where the financial impetus from all of this comes from, look into the financial system after Obama was elected and google the term "ESG." A single major financier at a company named Black Rock started demanding wokism to invest in anything. A major financier put into that position by the Democratic party and its operatives.

That's the problem here. One party is flirting with genuine fascism—the union of corporate and government power, used to subvert the standard rules of the political system and

make an end-run around constitutional or institutional protections of citizens' rights. It's the same thing as tech censorship. The major censors at each of those companies are former Democratic staffers or aides. (KeyStatus8880, 2021)

This rationale, complete with its several athletic leaps of logic, is indicative of the structure of this particularly suspicious, critical mindset. The user focuses early on the supposed "hate" that modern developers have for the assumed typical gamer, the "men, who are far more likely to be conservative than women are" (KeyStatus8880, 2021). This statement not only makes the surface-level assumption about men's politics but it also assumes that men are more likely to play these games than women. Both represent examples of a hegemonic "common sense" (Hall et al., 2013, p. 13).

The "ESG" this user mentions refers to the "Environment, Social and Governance" scorecard (Miller, n.d.; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2024) and has become one of the most salient "smoking guns" of this Web of connections. The role of creative consultancy firms such as Sweet Baby Inc. is also a popular theme, since their collaboration with game studies seems to confirm the notion of corruption from the outside. "SBI," as it is often known, engages with major developers to provide guidance on socially inclusive game development expertise—precisely the kind of social justice and therefore "woke" concerns in both the positive and negative senses of the word.

Another user criticizes the *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2005–2022) series of games along the same lines. In the recent installment, *God of War Ragnarök* (Santa Monica Studio, 2022), a Norse character is depicted with dark skin:

Wow. Thank god I found this thread. After playing barely half the game, I stopped to google "Is god of war ragnorok woke?" and found this. I thought I was losing my mind.

I think I'm done with this game. The wokeness is cancer. The one way race swapping wouldn't be at all accepted if it went the other way around. (Anyone want to see Chris Pine play Akunta Kinte?)

Game should have been called God of War: Wakanda Forever (2sec4u, 2022).

Several posts, including references to woke politics, appear in a recent search of the r/videogames subreddit, but interestingly, they seem to provoke very little engagement compared to the r/KotakuInAction forum. For example, a thread about "anti-woke activists" on r/KotakuInAction gained 50 upvotes and 30 comments in the first seven hours after it was posted. On r/Videogames, of the most recent 10 threads posted that reference the word "woke," three have neither upvotes nor comments in as many as 15 days after posting. Several others have between zero and five of either or both comments or upvotes after several months. The r/videogames (2008) forum describes itself as "An active and friendly subreddit for discussion of (almost) anything related to video games! Community content, guides, discussions, news, and more! Please ensure you read the subreddit rules," which seems to guide the selection of topics its users interact with away from those popular topics on r/KotakuinAction.

Pivot to Video: YouTube

Over the past decade or so, maintaining an online personality via video has become a lucrative pursuit with so-called “influencers” and “streamers” becoming household names in some cases. PewDiePie, for instance, was once identified as statistically “the most successful YouTuber with a net worth of over \$15 million and over 100 million subscribers” (Medina, Reed, & Davis, 2020, p. 21). Research about streamers and influencers is continually emerging, though many papers focus on their relations to marketing efforts and effects (Adiguzel, 2021; Jiang, Hua, & Parviainen, 2020; Li, Haviv, & Lovett, 2024). Others have begun investigating the “cultural production” of live game streaming, exploring the unique combination of game skill and personality important in the performance of a streamer (Pellicone & Ahn, 2017). Another angle closer to the intentions of this study focuses on the discourse about and around games and game play rather than as a presentation of gameplay itself. Nenzelius (2021) finds through quantitative analysis that “content creators can influence their viewers by enforcing either a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic discursive environment” (p. 27). For this study, we will examine a few YouTube critics with a more qualitative eye.

Asmongold (Asmongold TV, n.d.) is one of the more popular game critics on YouTube, with 2.43 million subscribers. The Act Man has 1.86 million subscribers, and Sydney Watson (SydneyWatson, n.d.), an Australian YouTuber, just under 1 million. One particularly prolific critic, Endymion (ENDYMIONtv, n.d.) boasts 295,000 subscribers.

The type of content produced by these critics can vary from carefully scripted and recorded video essays to real-time reactions to the videos of others, to free-form discussions of current events accompanied live by on-screen website browsing to highlight particular points. The feeling of the latter is something like a talk-back radio show with video accompaniment, in which viewers are actively responding to the presenter in the real-time text-based chat. Often, these videos are, in fact, streamed live, and exist on YouTube as archival copies after the fact. As such, the overall discursive quality can vary quite widely, as one would expect between some videos that are scripted, recorded, and edited, and others that are captured live.

The number of views these videos receive is substantial. For example, a video posted by Asmongold (Asmongold TV, 2024a) has amassed 1.3 million views in only three days. Endymion’s videos regularly average around 200,000 views each (ENDYMIONtv, n.d.). Several of Sydney Watson’s videos have posted more than 1 million views. The prolific nature of these producers should also be noted: Endymion has posted five scripted videos of approximately 22 minutes each within a week.

The language of these videos is often even more florid than posts on Reddit. The titles of their videos also leave little room for doubt. Endymion’s videos bear titles including: “The Insanity of Woke Media Exposed” (ENDYMIONtv, 2023a), “How Western Politics Ruined Modern Gaming & Journalism” (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b), and “Why Nobody Likes Woke Characters” (ENDYMIONtv, 2023b). Sydney Watson’s videos include: “Female Game Developers Make Everything Ugly” (Watson, 2023b), “When Woke Hollywood Rewrites History” (Watson, 2023a), and “Woke Developers are DESTROYING Gaming” (Watson, 2022).

Endymion focuses on popular media and the video game industry, including its relationship with the practice of game journalism. A cyclical relationship exists between these YouTube commentators,

professional journalism, and the game industry itself. Often, the topic of videos revolves around interpretations of what is or is not reported on sites like IGN, Kotaku, and GameSpot. In Endymion's case, he portrays himself as an excluded journalist, acting on journalistic integrity while remaining independent of game sites that are, in his words, "dead to me" (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b, 00:02:24). In this video, Endymion says, "I think it's my duty to discuss and point out the fallacies of this industry that I love so much" (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b, 00:04:08) and has generally cast himself as an independent voice, not beholden to the various forces he goes on to describe as controlling industry.

Endymion claims that there is a singular perspective that dominates coverage of the games industry. "[These] journalists all seem to be cut from the same cloth with the same ideologies" (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b, 00:08:04). He refers frequently to a "hivemind" that judges the positions taken by various journalists across various outlets. The notion of a hivemind is explicitly repeated in another commentator's video: "The industry is a hivemind of radical leftist opinions" (Disillusioned Player, 2023, 00:01:00). Although Watson does not use the term hivemind, she expresses a similar view that "leftists make sure to get their creepy little tendrils into one of the only things left that we can actually enjoy" (Watson, 2022, 00:00:52).

Watson continues to make one of the other major arguments sustained by these YouTube commentators: the games industry has changed. "It isn't just political messaging . . . this goes into other realms of social conditioning that we haven't seen before" (Watson, 2022, 00:01:08). Endymion also claims that the game development and journalism industries were free of this leftist ideology at some point in the past. For him, the change is not isolated but is in some way related to the Trump presidency:

Back in the early 2010s, the gaming industry as a whole was very situated around talking about video games and having fun with discussion. The days of shows like Podcast Beyond with Greg Miller and Colin Moriarty, for example, are what I consider to be the golden years of sites like IGN where people of differing political stances, walks of life, and so on could come together and talk like real human beings. But as time went on, and especially around 2016, when a certain president was elected into office, it seems like the world had just lost its mind and places like video game websites suddenly went from being fun and full of life to becoming gated off communities full of vitriol, tribalism, and political correctness. (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b, 00:04:30)

This depiction of the "early 2010s" as an idyllic, politics-free time during which a range of diverse people were able to cordially share their views and opinions is difficult to reconcile with the actual timeline of GamerGate, which reached a peak during 2014. Endymion further weakens his premise as a politically neutral observer when discussing the disappointing revival of the game-oriented television network G4. When describing its halcyon days of nonpolitical games-centered coverage, the accompanying image is of a young woman salaciously licking an iPhone (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b, 00:13:50).

This blindness to unequal distributions of power is the invisible, pervasive politics that Murray described as erupting into view during GamerGate. The perspectives espoused by these commentators highlight the importance of the cultural studies orientation to video game studies in general. Their position

corresponds to that which approaches what Murray seeks to unpack. This perspective, and that of GamerGate in the early 2010s, “struggle to keep games safe from the ‘SJW’ issues seeping into and ruining them,” which “extends a recognizable argument from history that tends to create a false dualism between an ‘activist’ group involved in some kind of identity politics . . . and a normative group that is not” (Murray, 2021, p. 38). Endymion and Watson and similar commentators do not just “tend” toward this dualism present it as fact.

These commentators emphasize their belief that the way video games existed in this “prepolitical” moment was a more natural and authentic state. As noted throughout the Reddit posts, the notion that these views are “forced” or “shoehorned” into games (and the coverage of games) is a consistent theme. Watson describes “unnecessary political and social messaging [that] is already pushed in basically every other medium” and that “countless games have gotten the same woke treatment” (Watson, 2022, 00:01:28). She further describes those messages as a plague, which evokes Endymion’s claims that the game industry is “dying.” Watson’s belief is that gaming was preferable when she could use it to “tune out everything and not have to be exposed to more politics” (Watson, 2022, 00:00:34). Her longing is for a past that, according to Murray, never existed. Instead of political neutrality, what Endymion and Watson refer to here is “a sense of unshakable domain over this realm of representation, a very aggressive form of territoriality and identity politics at play that is going unnamed” (Murray, 2021, p. 38). The tendency to look backward is also clear in the MAGA exhortation to “make America great again.”

Anti-woke critics tend to observe the perceived changes in the industry as an “attack” on either game players or on readers of games journalism. Endymion (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b) describes the behavior of games journalists acknowledging or advocating for progressive views in their writing as “attacks” on the readership nine times in one video. He also conflates the victimized gamer audience with Republicans, when describing Twitter commentary made by game journalist Adam Sessler (ENDYMIONtv, 2022b, 00:15:00). As such, Endymion seems to be aligning the game journalism industry with more generalized, left-leaning, liberal political movements. Game players, on the other hand, are assumed to identify more closely with right-wing and even expressly Republican Party politics.

Endymion examines the “woke” elements of such titles as *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League* (Rocksteady Studios, 2024) as the reason for the game’s poor sales performance and critical reception. Furthermore, not only does the game explicitly contain these woke elements but the origins can be traced back to individual developers and especially to the consultancy firm, Sweet Baby Inc.

It doesn’t matter how many video games die, franchises get ruined, or studios close down. In their eyes, this process, as they put it, is paramount to the destruction left in their wake. RockSteady falling apart and likely going under is not a loss in Sweet Baby’s eyes because—while hundreds of people will likely lose their jobs and the *Suicide Squad* game will tank their franchise and studio—it wasn’t all for nothing, apparently, because Kim Belair and her pet peons like Amy Shaw got to use the Batman Arkham universe as a vehicle to push their politics and further their agenda.

Sure, the game has an abysmal Metacritic score and fans absolutely hate it, but we don't matter anyway. All that matters is the creator's progress and we are simply obstacles placed in the way of their brilliant wokeness. (ENDYMIONtv, 2024, 00:07:00)

In this way, woke content of games can be directly and explicitly tied back to individual actors such as Kim Belair and Amy-Leigh Shaw, who are employees of Sweet Baby Inc. The pattern of behavior here is reminiscent of the actions taken during the height of GamerGate, when specific individuals such as Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, and Jennifer Hepler were targeted for online harassment by followers of the hashtag (Crecente, 2013; Sampson, 2013). More recently, even the voice actors who portray disliked characters are targets of such online harassment, such as Laura Bailey who voiced Abby in *The Last of Us: Part II* (Khan, 2020). These gamers feel that an industry of which they claim ownership has fundamentally changed, and for the worse, because of the actions of perceived outsiders.

Speaking in 2013, former BioWare developer Jennifer Hepler described change occurring throughout the game industry from a business perspective. Games are too expensive, she explained, to target the "niche market" of the straight, White, male gamers who are most displeased by the contributions she made to *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare, 2011). "To indulge a community that is actively trying to alienate this powerful market segment (not to mention gay men, casual gamers of all types, and anyone new to the hobby), is suicidal" (Crecente, 2013, para. 72).

Hepler's commentary (as cited in Crecente, 2013) touches on this article's final major theme raised by the anti-woke commentators themselves, namely the financial interest of game developers. Hepler's point is that games should expand to become more inclusive of varying viewpoints to attract a wider swathe of potential game players. This includes, as she notes, casual gamers, women and gay men, and others who may be more interested in diverse stories and characters. Perhaps it is this kind of commentary that Endymion thinks of when he describes game journalists' and developers' "attacks" on the people he believes make up the "real" game playing community. As noted above, streamers like Endymion and Sydney Watson are staunchly against the inclusion of so-called "woke politics" because, since they pander to purportedly imaginary players, they will result in the failure of individual games and whole studios.

Integrating a perspective that suggests that video games should restrict themselves to the narrow, young, straight, White, male consumer to remain financially viable is difficult when this perspective excludes huge swathes of the population. This is further complicated by the accusation that developers are altering their games to acquire further corporate investments, by following guidance provided by inclusivity consultants such as Sweet Baby Inc.

Some gamer critics have blamed ESG and the "scorecard" system for the injection of the so-called woke ideologies into video games. Critics believe that game publishers, by improving their indicators around diversity and social responsibility, are more likely to attract investment from these large fund managers. Critics like Asmongold (2024b), ENDYMIONtv (2022a), Upper Echelon (2024), and YellowFlash 2 (2023) cite these influences as proof that game development has been corrupted by the pursuit of money. Critics argue that anything done to games to improve ESG ratings is immoral and creatively bankrupt. Further, as described by the Reddit user KeyStatus8880 (2021) above, the conspiracy purports that key decision-

makers at these companies are planted by the Democratic Party. This, in their view, suggests that the game industry is complicit in a much wider cultural battle.

Simultaneously, however, these critics maintain that video games that do include these woke elements will be financial disasters because the "real" audience of straight, White, male gamers will not buy them. The critics seem unaware of the hypocritical logic that labels one type of pursuit of revenue as valid and the other type as corruption. Revenue generated by sales to a subpopulation of gamers is legitimate, whereas revenue gained because of corporate investment is not, or so they say.

Conclusion

Stuart Hall (2011) reminds us that contradiction in a dominant ideology is hardly a drawback. He argues that "there is no single, integrated 'ruling ideology'" but rather that "ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments" (Hall, 2011, p. 18). Avid game players certainly possess an emotional investment, so tying together these various disparate views and arguments suits the project. The projected "gamer" identity remains focused around the traditional, straight, White male bloc and excludes any feminist, LGBTQ, or otherwise marginalized players or characteristics.

Murray (2021) analyzes *The Last of Us: Part I* (Naughty Dog, 2013) from the perspective of "Whiteness in crisis" saying in part that the main playable character, Joel, is the "so-called American average hardworking man, come to the end of his rope and emptied out of his inherent value in a society that has changed around him" (p. 110). Through her insightful commentary and the framework erected by Hall (2011), we can see the game as a projection of real-world anxieties and fantasies into an environment in which the putative White, cisgendered male players might take back some of their masculine supremacy through successfully protecting Ellie and completing the game. The death of Joel at the hands of Abby in the sequel comes as not only a narrative plot twist, but as a betrayal of a promise the first game made to a certain type of gamer. The traditional, stereotypical gamer might feel their dominant status is indeed being undermined and destabilized, not only in the fiction of the game but in the reality of the game industry.

Through the various logical leaps described above, one can begin to map the feeling that some reactionary, anti-woke gamers have about what they perceive as a loss in the real world, represented by the failure of Joel to live up to his masculine potential. As gamers blame Abby for her in-game transgression, they blame women and other interest groups for causing their perceived marginalization in the real world as well. The anger and disdain with which these anti-woke critics react to the possibility of more equitable treatment demonstrates the need for a continuation of this kind of work, both in the production of video games, and in critical reflection upon them. The field of video games here has served as a setting for the conversation around the place of heteronormative, masculine Whiteness as compared with different visions, including LGBTQ representations, alternative visions of femininity and masculinity, and various perspectives on race. Through the lens of critical responses to video games, we can gain an understanding of the broader concerns about social status and trends that these most vocal gamers perceive.

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